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2014

Bullying: Prevention/ intervention strategies with high school students

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Recommended Citation

Blau, Chloe, "Bullying: Prevention/ intervention strategies with high school students" (2014). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 366.
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HPR Senior Honors Project Summary

Bullying is one of the largest issues that face public schools today. An average of 1 in 4 U.S. students complain of bullying problems at school (Facts, 2014). This type of abuse can lead to serious mental distress, and well as drive children to physically harm themselves or others. Those who bully use verbal, emotional, and physical tactics in their pursuit of damaging their victims. More recently, students have taken to social media to conduct their abuse, which provides a bit more anonymity rather than face-to-face harassment. In order to help solve this growing problem, various programs, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program focus on bullying prevention within school systems. My hope was to expand the current research and tackle bullying prevention, intervention and after-care, ensuring that students feel supported through all phases of bullying. By informing students of various bullying issues and recovery strategies via the delivery of a curriculum unit, the goal was to make students more aware of the negative impacts of bullying and how to help the problem themselves.

I chose this type of project and research topic for various reasons. As a college student, I am aware of how prevalent and serious this situation is, and that there is a dire need for change. This perspective brings a unique approach to both the techniques used in the study, and the types of questions that were asked of the participants. As well as being in the students' age range, I am a former victim of both verbal and physical bullying. Now, as someone who has worked through the consequences of these acts and as an aspiring psychologist, my hope was to inspire young people to speak out against those who are intentionally abusing others. Research shows that both those who bully and those who are the targets of bullying have various physical, emotional and

psychological side effects. A research study conducted for the American School Health Association's *Journal of School Health* stated the following about bullying and its' impact on victims and perpetrators: "Perpetrators and victims of bullying experience poorer social, emotional and physical health outcomes. Bullying victimization is shown to correlate with the following physical symptoms: headache, stomach ache, backache and dizziness. Psychologically, victimization is associated with nervousness, depression, helplessness and loneliness. Early adolescents are especially vulnerable to the psychological effects of bullying, which include depression, suicide ideation and loneliness" (Owusu 2011). This is a large problem that is continuing to grow as technology advances, and it is something that I could not sit by and watch happen any longer.

In order to answer this research question, it was decided to develop a curriculum that would be taught to participants. Each curriculum was organized with a similar format: an advanced organizer, topic information, video and audio clips, and points of reflection/discussion. One curriculum per week for six consecutive weeks was taught to students, each week focusing on a different topic within the scope of bullying (ex. mental health, cyber bullying, etc.). Students met with the Dean of Students and myself for an hour and participated in an interactive learning experience. The program was designed to be discussion based and receive feedback from students. The research was conducted at a public school in South County, Rhode Island. In order to assess changes in attitudes, identical pre and post assessments comprised of fifty questions were given to participants. The questions were broken into five categories: the self, family and friends, school, past/present bullying experiences, and bullying in the future. These sections were

chosen to determine pre-existing attitudes that relate to bullying and to see how those would change given the information that was provided to them.

After analyzing and comparing the pre and post assessments of each participant, the objective of the research was somewhat met. On average, the attitudes about bullying appeared to have stayed the same. However, there were some very important developments made by participants throughout the workshops. While reflecting on changes within themselves, participants seem to have gained more self-confidence and an overall self-appreciation in accepting that bullying situations do not reflect on their character and they should not feel burdened by these experiences. Also, participants felt more trust and openness with their family and friends. According to the assessments, participants have increased their authority and taken charge in a bullying situation as well. Most importantly for this particular research, students increased their knowledge and faith in both themselves and their school in terms of preventing or intervening in potential situations in the future. Overall, although not all of the changed attitudes were reflected through the assessments, participants gained important knowledge and have made changes in many of their beliefs.

Bullying has become an enormous challenge for students, both in and outside of school. Research conducted earlier this year by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that 70.6% of teens have seen bullying occurring in their schools (Facts, 2013). Due to these incredibly high numbers, this research project attempted to expand on pre-existing research and provide students with knowledge to prevent and intervene future bullying instances and heal themselves afterward. The expectations for this research was that students would reflect more positive attitudes in all areas assessed.

However, when comparing the pre and post assessments of each participant, the data did not increase as well as expected. Although most the data stayed the same, some areas did increase positively.

Potential reasons for this lack of change are numerous. The answers given on the written assessments do not reflect attitudes that students portrayed via group discussions during the workshop, so perhaps a more verbal analysis of attitude change would be better suited for this subject. By simply examining the results of this preliminary research, it appears that students were not influenced much by the curricula content. In reality, the participants came out of the workshop with a wealth of knowledge, advice, and answers. By altering the format of the assessment, those changes could perhaps be better reflected. For future studies, it might be helpful to assess pre-existing knowledge and tailor the curricula participants' established knowledge and interests. Also, potential studies could examine this problem in more specific outlets (i.e. urban vs. rural school settings, race/ethnicity differences, middle schools, etc). No matter the future direction, this is a growing problem that needs immediate attention, and teaching students how to handle a bullying scenario via curricula is a huge advancement in helping teens tackle the issue of bullying head on.

References

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